



Return to Tears: Musical Mourning, Emotion, and Religious Reform in Two South Asian Minority Communities

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**Return to tears: Musical mourning, emotion, and
religious reform in two south Asian minority communities**

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A recurring theme in cross-cultural discussions of mortuary rituals is the complexity of affect or emotion, elements of happiness mixed with sadness, varieties of “celebration” in contexts of mourning.¹ This article is concerned with such complexity, its articulation through ritual, music, and discourse, and its constraints. My intentions are threefold: 1) to extend my project of documenting and explaining the ways in which music creates and supports meaning in south Asian ritual contexts;² 2) to address a special methodological problem: how to think about two historically and culturally unrelated field projects in a larger interpretive frame; and 3) to offer a hypothesis, namely that there has been a narrowing of emotional spectrum in *public* displays of mourning, especially in urban areas of the Indian subcontinent, over the last one-hundred-and-fifty years or so; and to suggest how this narrowing is registered musically.

The article is based on two fieldwork projects, each of them initially involving about two years’ fieldwork. The first case is a study of the mortuary rituals of a “tribal” minority community, the Kotas of the Nilgiri hills in Tamilnadu. The second is a multi-sited study of public Muharram observances in India and Pakistan. This first half of this article is devoted to explicating the affective diversity of selected rituals, especially as they relate to music. One of the important implications of such diversity, in both case studies, is that it draws attention to

¹ See, for instance, discussions and references in Metcalf and Huntington 1991, Köpping 1999, Hertz 1960

nuances in the ways the living might relate to the dead. This is not only significant in mortuary ceremonies (where the deceased are remembered friends and relatives), but in Shi‘i memorial practices as well. Music sometimes highlights the ways in which agents articulate a sense of loss; sometimes it also provides a means for celebrating the life of the deceased, or in the Shi‘i case, for celebrating the empowerment Husain’s martyrdom ultimately conferred upon the Muslim community.

The second half of this article outlines the kinds of historical factors, primarily reformist ideologies, that would seem to have placed constraints on affective diversity in connection with public ritual. In attempting to cover a great deal of ground in a limited space, I cannot, unfortunately, provide a fine grained exegesis of how participants experience emotion, music, and ritual, and how they communicated that experience to me,³ nor can I elaborate on the dynamics of reform movements. My hope is that these case studies—because they are unrelated in many ways—will stimulate the reader to envision a process of change occurring on a scale that transcends the specific examples, and which involves affectivity or emotionality as one of its many parameters.

A few notes on fieldwork

I became interested in learning about the music of Nilgiri tribal peoples (my first case study) after having spent a decade studying south Indian classical music on the mridangam drum and the stringed instrument, the vina, in Madurai and Madras. As an ethnomusicologist, I wanted to study a type of music that was embedded both in standardized ritual forms and in everyday life; Indian classical music was alive for me aesthetically, but I yearned to study a music that was more vital in the religious lives of a particular community. This objective led me

² See Wolf (1997a; 1997b; 2000a; 2000b; 2000/2001a; 2000/2001b; Forthcoming).

to the Kotas, who maintain a lively and complex ritual culture which is articulated strongly by music.

I travelled to the Nilgiri hills in 1990 and stayed there for two years, learning the Kota language (a Dravidian language without a script), and living in a Kota household for fourteen months. There I observed and participated in funerals, marriages, temple festivals, and virtually all formal and informal aspects of Kota life. I engaged in numerous conversations about the meanings of rituals and musical pieces, gathering information from young and old in all of the seven villages. After sifting through my data, I returned to the Nilgiris to ask further questions, present Kota associates my publications, and discuss ideas.⁴

After completing my doctoral work, I wished to broaden my methodological horizons, addressing systematic questions of how music functions in ritual in several parts of south Asia rather than in one particular society. This led me to initiate a more geographically diffuse project on ritual in Islamic contexts (1996-1999), one in which I could not wholly rely on my intuitions from my experiences with south Indian Hindus and tribals. I lived in the city of Lahore, Pakistan for the first year, and for the second I lived with a Shi'i family in the Ghazi Mandi neighborhood of old Lucknow. One focus of my research was the public aspect of performance during Muharram, the Shi'i observance in honor of Imam Hussain, the martyred grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. My insights into the place of emotion in this observance, and by extension into music, pageantry, poetry, architecture, and other domains, have emerged from interviews with members of all communities who participate in it, not just Shi'ahs.

Music and Mourning, Case 1: The Kotas

³ I discuss these issues at greater length in Wolf (2000a; and Forthcoming).

⁴ These visits of one to three months each occurred between 1996 and 1999, and 2000-2001.

The Kotas number about 1,500 by their own estimates and are classified by the government as a Scheduled Tribe. Although Kota culture exhibits cultural and linguistic features distinct enough, perhaps, to have warranted a separate administrative classification, Kota religion shares features with the Hinduism of the majority population—the notion of divinity inhering in fire and objects, the importance of “visual interaction” (cf. Babb 1981; Eck 1981) and the spiritual significance of sound (cf. Beck 1993). Many Kotas participate in popular south Indian Hindu worship and some call themselves Hindus. Until about mid-century Kotas served as musicians, carpenters, iron and precious metalworkers, basketmakers, and potters for other communities in the Nilgiris (Mandelbaum 1989). Although this has changed for complex economic, cultural, and demographic reasons, the Kotas continue to maintain a lively and complex ritual culture in which artisanship plays an important symbolic and performative role. The most elaborate rituals are organized according to a dual classification system of “god” and “death”; the system is articulated strongly by the names of musical pieces, the genres in which they are classified, and the principle of musical non-mixing—i.e. keeping contextually defined pieces melodically distinct.

The focus here is on Kota mortuary ceremonies, of which there are two types: the “green” funeral (*pac tav*), in which the corpse is cremated and bone relics preserved in a special crevice located in the “green” cremation ground; and the “dry funeral” (*varldav*), in which the bone relics from all those who have died over a specified number of years are placed on colorfully decorated biers and once again incinerated in a “dry” cremation ground. The green funeral is so named because the corpse is wet, it is fresh, and symbols of life such as green plant stalks are used to decorate the funeral bier. The dry funeral is named after the dried bone fragments preserved from the initial cremation. The rituals are highly complex and can be analyzed in

many ways. Two aspects should be emphasized here: 1) the soteriological: it is believed that the spirits of the dead are somehow appeased and their journey to the land of the dead assisted by the proper performance of both funerals; 2) the social: the period of mourning is formally concluded so that spouses of the deceased may remarry and the village celebrate its yearly cycle of festivals (Mandelbaum 1954, Wolf 2000/2001).

As the successive stages of Kota green and dry funerals unfold, a variety of emotional and aesthetic textures emerge. Grief is seldom unmitigated. Kotas explain that as the green and dry funerals proceed there is a general progression from sadness to happiness, distance from the divine to proximity to the divine, and defilement to purity. In its general outlines, this progression is a cross-culturally common one (cf. Bloch and Parry 1982).

Kotas divide their musical world into contextually defined genres: music for god (*devr kol*, *devr pat*), music for death (*dukt kol*), and music for dancing (*at kol*). There are separate repertoires of vocal and instrumental music and these are used for different purposes. Outdoor instrumental music, the focus for this discussion, is performed on shawms called *kol*, and cylinder and frame drums. Special instrumental tunes accompany most important funerary rituals; one of the implicit functions of instrumental music is to effect the process of moving the deceased out of the village. The process is physical as well as metaphysical, so as the deceased leaves the village, death is also made to leave. Along the way, individual pieces and sub-genres within the funeral repertoire help to define the subtly changing emotional character of the proceedings (Wolf 1997a; 2000/2001b; Forthcoming).

The rituals composing the green and dry funeral are intrinsically interesting and extraordinarily complicated. Here I focus on a few of the rituals which are both accompanied by special musical pieces and evocative of emotions that are not merely sad, but of a mixed or

multilayered character. Kotas explain that tunes carry context-specific resonances, bearing an affective imprint of the accompanying event. The problem is in isolating what a musical piece, apart from its context, makes people feel. Perhaps we can accept the rather softer thesis that a piece tends to support the emotional tenor of a ritual moment. If an unsuitable piece is inadvertently played at the wrong time there is public outcry; and much of this outcry is based on the way Kota instrumental music makes Kotas feel.

A few examples will help illustrate this idea. At the beginning of the dry funeral, musicians perform an emotive melody for a ritual of pouring millet (vatm) in front of the house of the deceased. This tune is said to be very moving and in practice appears to bring copious tears to the eyes of widows and female relatives—although one must always keep in mind that the public display of grief and the inner experience of grief are not necessarily convergent. The ritual as a whole, and the music specifically, are said to draw the souls of the dead into the village from the cremation ground and substantialize their spirit in the form of millet. Then, musicians perform what they describe as relatively more cheerful pieces, dance tunes, for the processions between each site of millet-pouring. It is a conscious technique on their part; Kotas are communicating musically that the sad moment is over once the millet is poured and that the soul has begun the next stage of its journey to the other world (Wolf Forthcoming). For several nights following the millet pouring, men and women dance in a special dancing area (*at kaval*) in front of particular village houses.

The dancing on these nights is lighthearted; in some villages, men drink heavily and stumble through the dances. Such behavior, while tolerated, is not considered part of the ritual. By the time the dry funeral is celebrated, the immediate feeling of loss has subsided—signs of intense grief are manifested only at ritually specified times. For most participants in the dry

funeral it is neither difficult nor contradictory to dance with abandon throughout the dry funeral. In contrast, participants still feel the pain acutely when dancing around the corpse during the green funeral. Although many describe this dance as constituting a sort of farewell party for the deceased, it tends to be far more sober in the green funeral than in the dry funeral.

On the eighth day, male volunteers close to the deceased collect bone relics from the initial cremation, place them on highly decorated biers, and carry these biers in procession along with a number of symbolic objects to be re cremated. Kotas perform songs and dances, eat communally, and spend the night in an area reserved for this ceremony. Men used to compete with one another to subdue and sacrifice large semi-wild buffaloes in honor of the deceased.⁵ Tunes Kotas recognize to be in a separate, somewhat jubilant, emotional category (*ker kol*) were performed for this sacrifice fifty years ago when it was still common. Finally, early in the morning when the planet Venus is sighted, the musicians perform a special melody to send the souls of the dead off to the land of the dead. This tune belongs to the class known as the “gathering at the land of the dead tunes” (*narguc kol*); they are considered to be the most emotive and important of the Kota mourning tunes, and are also generally the longest.

One might wish to ask at this juncture, “what does it mean for a Kota instrumental tune to be sad?”—or the related question, “what does it mean for a piece to belong to the funeral genre as opposed to the genres of god tunes or dance tunes?” To summarize a complex issue (see Wolf Forthcoming), Kotas believe that funeral tunes are sad either because they are themselves conventionally associated with sadness, or because they resemble other conventionally sad tunes; these tunes are also sad because Kotas feel they iconically resemble crying, and because they possess a slow, lethargic quality that in Kota culture, like the segment of American culture in

⁵ For discussion of a song addressed to one such buffalo, see Wolf (2000/2001b, 158).

which I was raised, tends to be associated with sadness and mourning. But not all the tunes performed during funerals are meant to be mournful; various subrepertoires and isolated pieces emphasize for Kotas such funerary themes as respect, individual and communal memory, love and loss, excitement and competition. Such themes, far from being limited to the Kotas, are typical of mourning rituals in many cultures, including rituals of mournful commemoration, such as those in Muharram, that are not funerals at all.

Case 2: Shi'ahs, Muharram, and Music in South Asia

Shi'i Muslims make up about 10-15% of the Muslim population in the Indian subcontinent (Muslims comprise a total of 25% of the total population). A minority in most Muslim countries (except Iraq and Iran), Shi'ahs, like other Muslims, believe the Qur'an was God-given, that Muhammad was the last Prophet of God, and that God, Allah, is unitary. They differ in their allegiance to particular members of Muhammad's family, whom they believe were his legal and spiritual successors.

Muharram, the specific concern of this part of the article, commemorates the pitched battle of Karbala, Iraq, in 680 c.e., in which the army of the Ummayyad ruler Yazid slaughtered Muhammad's grandson, Husain, and his followers, after Husain refused to abdicate his position of political and spiritual leadership of the Muslim community. To show their allegiance to the slain martyrs, and to the principle of successorship that Husain embodied, Shi'ahs retell the story of Husain's martyrdom. They recall scenes from the battle using a variety of dramatic verbal genres, and participate in processions, carrying battle standards, tomb replicas, and other icons of the Karbala story (compare Chelkowski 1979). In rural areas Shi'ahs play drums but in cities it is generally Hindus and Sunnis who perform drums and other musical instruments during Muharram.

That which is called *musiqi*, music, is frequently criticized in Islamic scriptures (except those of certain Sufi orders), because, to put it very simply, it distracts one's mind and senses from thoughts of God. But what constitutes "music" often turns on shifting definitions; frequently music means instrumental music or vocal music accompanied by musical instruments. In south Asian Muharram observances, poetic recitations, set to melodies, may be perfectly acceptable if they are not accompanied by musical instruments and if their texts relate to the theme of Muharram (judgements vary from region to region). Performing such texts is considered "reading" or "reciting," not "singing."

South Asian Muslims, like Kotas, sometimes represented their range of ritual observances to me in terms of two categories "sad occasions" (*gham ke mauq'e*) and "joyous occasions" (*khush ke mauq'e*). The former consist of funerals and Muharram, the latter include the birth anniversary of the Prophet, weddings and the celebration at the end of the month of fasting. Although "sad" and "happy" is the macro-classification scheme for most occasions, there are areas in which the distinctions are blurred. Just as a spirit of excitement prevails in the Kota buffalo sacrifice, so too does an atmosphere of frenzy and passion prevail in certain Muharram observances. Whether in the form of Shi'i preachers who verbally whip their audiences into a frenzy, musical performances that tunefully coax mourners into extended states of excitement, or guilds of *nauha* poetry reciters and breast beaters who accelerate their own fervor, the enactment of Muharram produces a state of zealous passion (*josh*).

Participants distinguish feelings of passion from feelings of sadness, though both can exist simultaneously; the degree to which one or the other of these emotional complexes is emphasized depends upon religious community, family practice, location, and particular event in the sequence of Muharram rituals. The slaying of Husain and his supporters is considered tragic,

but many south Asian Muslims feel that through this tragedy Islam attained a higher victory. The passion with which they observe Muharram reflects both Islam's victory and participants' attempts to empathize with Karbala's martyrs. Outside of Muharram as well, devout Shi'ahs live and interpret their lives today largely within the moral and social implications of the Karbala narrative.

In addition to passion and sadness, episodes of the Karbala narrative evoke secondary emotions—emotions that by themselves are distinct from sadness, but which in the context of the Karbala tale tend, sometimes ironically, to amplify the theme of tragedy. For example, the intensity of a mother's love for her child, mixed with the unthinkable experience of loss, is created in the women's mourning assembly as participants sing lullabies to Husain's infant son, Ali Asghar, in the persona of Husain's wife. Husain's brother's son, Qasim, was quickly married before he died in battle (so the story goes; it is not historically verifiable). On the seventh day of Muharram, south Asian Shi'ahs sometimes sing special songs and hire a brass band to "celebrate" his wedding.⁶ Participants explain that this celebration does not connote pure joy, but a paradoxical joy that intensifies the effect of tragedy.

Over Muharram's sixty eight days, the principal contexts during which participants perform musical instruments are processions. Processions are arenas for aesthetic elaboration not only of sound, but also of visual and sometimes martial arts. Depending on locality, Shi'ahs, Sunnis, and even Hindus parade *ta'ziyahs*, multistory structures representing the tomb of Imam Husain. Some processions also feature horses symbolizing Husain's steed, *zuljina*, and replicas

⁶ The appearance of a symbolic marriage in south Asian Muharram observances accrues significance when viewed in the context of mortuary rituals in the subcontinent. It is not uncommon for some sort of ritual "marriage," or at the least a rite affirming the importance of affinal bonds (at least in South India), to be performed in connection with a funeral or memorial observance. Such is the case with several of the Nilgiri hill communities, including the Kotas (Wolf 1997a, 214-215). See also Nabokov's discussion of marriage symbolism in Tamil rituals of transforming deceased relatives into household deities (1996).

of Ali Asghar's cradle, Qasim's marriage palanquin, and other paraphernalia (See, e.g. Pinault 1992 and 2001). Participants also parade standards, called '*alam*', representing characters in the Karbala tragedy.

An important mode of Muharram religious performance is mimetic. Muharram's dramatic narrative is that of Karbala, on the battlefield of which participants wish to place themselves. In the Shi'i style of embodied remembrance, individuals vow, in the name of Imam Husain, to offer their children, or themselves, as beggars, soldiers, or water carriers in the procession; in this way they viscerally participate in the "battle." In similar spirit, just as drummers would have participated in the battle of Karbala, so also do mourners assume the role of drummers to place themselves meaningfully and realistically on the battlefield. The kettle drums, cylinder drums, and shawms used in these procession are also symbols of royal power throughout the Muslim world.⁷

As already noted, Shi'i communities in the subcontinent differ in the degree to which they find drums and musical instruments appropriate or inappropriate. One reason for this is that in cities and among modern families there is a feeling that "respectable" or high status communities in India should not beat the drums, perform musical instruments, and go out on parade when they are ostensibly in mourning. Since the overall theme of Muharram is one of sadness, *gham*, Shi'ahs in urban areas have become increasingly uncomfortable with musical practices that appear celebratory. This does not mean that processions, drumming, and instrumental performances no longer exist during Muharram, just that in cities, devout Shi'ahs are trying very hard to disassociate themselves from these practices. Note, however, that some of the same urban Shi'ahs who disassociate themselves with musical performance still embrace

⁷ For discussion of how the meanings of such ensembles have been transformed, see Flora (1995).

the practice of *matam* (literally, mourning)—breast beating with the hands at least, but sometimes with razor blades and swords. Urban attitudes do not reflect a simple process of communities becoming bourgeois, as some colleagues have suggested upon hearing an oral version of this paper.

Possible reasons for these apparent changes in attitude will be cited in the next section, including some of the arguments Sunni clerics have levelled against Shi‘i practices in general as well as against musical performance in particular. In preparation for the critiques, it would be useful to consider the possible rationales for musical instruments during Muharram processions. The following five are among the most important: 1) textual surrogates: the melodies and rhythms performed on musical instruments assiduously match meters and melodies of Muharram poetic forms. Thus some instrumental pieces are considered less as music than as vehicles for propagating religious messages 2) Mimesis: drums mimic sounds of galloping horses, marching platoons, and the peace of a battlefield at the end of a battle; bands also create a festive atmosphere in the symbolic marriage of Qasim 3) Affect: The tonal and rhythmic quality of the music sounds mournful to some Muharram participants. 4) Functionality: Drum rhythms both announce starting, stopping and intermediate points in processions and act as sorts of musical ushers or conductors, not unlike the rhythms of Western marching bands 5) Creation of beauty: decorated battle standards, tomb replicas, and other processional floats; and music and agile martial displays of sword fighting serve as forms of aesthetic entertainment for the spiritually-present martyrs.⁸

In fact, music and drumming could very well support the emotional and thematic contours of Muharram, and one might imagine that, in another political climate, pious Shi‘ahs

⁸ Rationales 1-3 are discussed at some length in Wolf (2000a).

could use these rationales to explain away Islamic injunctions against music. Professional and amateur drummers and performers of other instruments have professed that what they play during Muharram is not really “music” after all—but many professional musicians have privately confessed that they regard their performances as musical; it is simply not politic to openly use the word music to describe what they perform during Muharram.

Still, there has been a gradual decline in the degree of musical performance and the diversity of musical repertoire associated with Muharram in south Asia, and this decline is attributable to a variety of historical factors, particularly religious reforms.

Recent movements toward reform

Here I wish to focus on what appear to be some of the musical consequences of religious revival and reform in south Asia beginning late in the 18th century. Specific cause-and-effect relationships between reforms and musical practices are difficult to trace, and would in any case be of limited utility in assessing the larger phenomena; my discussion emphasizes only the ideological thrust of the reforms. I summarize the kinds of changes that have taken place (or are supposed to have taken place) and consider what I was led to regard as the impetus for these changes. I start with the late 18th century because it coincides with rise of British power in the subcontinent and because descriptions of ritual musical practices before this period are scant. Important to note for our period is not only British political influence but the moral influence bestowed by temporal power.

Both Muslims and Hindus felt challenged by Christian religious ideals and modern western rationalist thought and sought to respond—although in different ways at different times (Bharati and Robinson 1989). Early Hindu responses were “defensive” (345): reformers laid emphasis on religious precepts that did not conflict with missionary criticisms of Hinduism; such

criticisms were levelled, for example, at polytheism, widow-burning, female infanticide, untouchability, and local ecstatic practices involving sex and spirit possession. Nineteenth century reformers in such societies as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj did not usually target music *per se*, but they did affect larger institutions of which music was a part.

The historian of 19th century Bengal may find my treatment of reform rather scant; indeed movements toward social and religious change varied both historically and geographically. My interest here is in the broad contours of these movements in the subcontinent; few would dispute that there were a congeries of related ideas “in the air.” To get a better sense of these ideas, it might be worthwhile to provide a bit of background on the Brahmo Samaj, for it evidently “played a crucial role in the genesis and development of every major religious, social, and political movement in India from 1820 to 1930” (Kopf 1979, xiii).

The Brahmo Samaj was founded in 1843 by Debendranath Tagore, building on the Unitarian Committee and later the Brahmo Sabha of Rammohun Roy. The reforms were initially set in Bengal, drawing upon the unitarianism of England and the United States, and involving an elite minority in Calcutta. The “links” between the Calcutta-based initiative and the Unitarians were three, according to the historian David Kopf: 1) an emphasis on “rational” religion, emancipating human beings from “meaningless superstitions, and other-worldly beliefs and values,” 2) social elevation of economically and culturally downtrodden men and women, and 3) a universal movement toward the perfection of mankind (Kopf 1979, 3).

The Brahmo Samaj was not, and did not always remain, a single “movement.” There was a great deal of internal variation, in-fighting, and change. In the early 20th century, Rabindranath Tagore defended an earlier form of Brahmoism as against the “emotionalism” Bijoy Krishna Goswami had infused into the movement. The following quote from Rabindranath’s letter of

1910 will serve as an example of how music registers in reformist discourse, that is, not as pointed target of attack in its own right, but as part of a series of activities, a class of behavior that is undesirable:

The last goal of Shaktism and Vaishnavism is emotionalism . . . We can achieve nothing lasting by drinking wine or playing on the *khol* [a drum] or by smoking *ganja*. When we try to create an excitement in ourselves by disregarding the outer world completely, then we can imagine ourselves anything or anyone such as Krishna. To avoid the rightful protest of the outer world, we declare such religious outbursts as meaningless. . . . Instead we should try our best to spiritualize the outer world (quoted in Kopf 1979, 77).

Neither musical performance as a ritual act, nor the inner spiritual effect of music as a religious goal, are regarded as legitimate. More broadly, early Hindu reformers in the subcontinent labelled many local practices as “superstitious.” Some searched for a more pure form of religion captured in a source that transcended locality, namely the Vedas. Low caste funeral practices such as vibrant drumming to call gods and spirits, entertain the souls of the dead, or drive away evil spirits would not have been encouraged in these early movements; indeed, drumming was also one of the first activities the early missionaries banned. Hindu reformers, concerned with social uplift, also fought against what they considered to be unnecessary expenditures of time and money on elaborate rituals, be these marriages or funerals. Later, of course, Gandhian principles of non-violence further affected the ritual treatment of animals—especially among tribes and castes who performed bloody animal sacrifices. These downtrodden communities began to modify or abandon rituals organized around animal sacrifice, and along with them associated musical practices.

The rise of British power in the late 18th century was also a harbinger of the Mughal empire's final demise. The social and political problems Muslims faced as an increasingly powerless minority during the 19th century were, in the minds of some leaders, attributable not only to the vagaries of world political and economic change, but also to individual moral corruption. By returning to scriptural Islam and eschewing customary practices that were, after all, Indian, or worse, Hindu, Muslims of a certain ilk felt that they would, with the help of god, return to a state of grace.

Religious decrees, and responses to them, provide a trace of public Islamic debates of the past century and a half. For the present purposes it will be useful to focus on the debates concerning Shi'ism, and in doing so I will mention only a few representative criticisms levelled against Shi'ahs by the prominent theologian, Shah Abdul Aziz. Aziz led a circle of influential reformist thinking in Delhi from 1763 to 1824 and published an extensive, if somewhat vicious and ill-informed diatribe against Shiism that was completed in about 1790.

Aziz, it should be kept in mind, was among the most outspoken and extreme of the critics of Shi'ism; he considered both Shi'ahs and Sufis (at least those who supported the use of music such as Qawwali) to be infidels. He branded Shi'ahs "childish" for their mimetic performances and for their belief in the martyr's spiritual presence (Rizvi 1982, 337-38). He also criticized the mournful affective dimension of Shi'i piety, the redemptive value of "weeping, making images and playing instruments as acts of worship." Here Aziz drew attention to the fact that Shi'i clerics did not commit their support of these popular practices to writing (Rizvi 1982, 340-41). Aziz compared Shi'i regard for their Imams as embodied in their treatment of *ta'ziyahs* with Hindu worship of images. This is a strong condemnation in a religion that not only forbids iconic representations of God, but also of human beings (and sometimes of almost anything at

all). Furthering this critique of iconicity, he targeted the ritual commemoration of Qasim's wedding, which, being "exactly like a that of a living being" was disturbingly representational. Levelling the ultimate insult in the subcontinental context, he accused them of being "more superstitious than the Hindus" (Rizvi 1982, 340-351).

Shi'i ulema responded promptly and thoroughly to these vicious attacks; but notably, they did not defend local "superstitious" practices, ascribing them, rather, to ignorant village people who were not fully conversant with true Islam.⁹ Like the early, defensive, Hindu reformers, Shi'i leaders of the 19th century concentrated on (non place-specific) validating practices that could be justified in the Qur'an or the sayings of the prophet. Music during Muharram did not fall into this category, despite the fact that rationales for musical performance followed a more general cultural logic that was accepted. In an Urdu translation of Aziz's *fatwas* (religious decrees) in Arabic, Aziz repeatedly addressed the issue of music. In a brief "treatise" on singing (*ghina*), Aziz drew upon sayings of the Prophet, primarily in the Hanafi legal tradition, and appears to have concluded that singing—Aziz localized the notion of singing to the singing of *ragas*—is forbidden (*haram*) even in the absence of musical instruments (Aziz 1926, 139-43). In a different *fatwa*, he cited ulema who support singing, either alone or accompanied by the frame drum, in sanctioned contexts of joy, so long as such singing was not "frivolous" (involving *lahv*) and did not contain prohibited texts (e.g. praising men, beautiful women, or the effects of liquor). Aziz adopted the position that under no circumstances would it be acceptable to sing or listen to singing at graves—a clear jab at Sufis and Shi'ahs (Aziz 1926, 78).¹⁰

These decrees and their responses contributed to the polarization of Shi'i and Sunni communities, which gained momentum in the late 19th century. Religious leaders used such

⁹ Some of these passages on Shah Abdul Aziz are adapted from Wolf (2000a, 102n.47).

controversies to pit their respective constituencies against one another. Early in the 19th century and increasingly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, riots began breaking out during Muharram in Lucknow city, a Shi'i stronghold known for elaborate Muharram processions. Gradually, Shi'ahs and Sunnis began emphasizing their differences, reinforcing if not creating new religious boundaries (Hasan 1997).

The musical consequences of these changes, to put it simply, were that musical instruments and drumming came increasingly to be regarded by Shi'ahs as cheerful and celebratory. This evidently led Shi'ahs to abandon drumming in many cities—even during the ritual commemoration of Qasim's wedding. Sunnis and Hindus, to some extent, continued to maintain traditions of Muharram drumming. Conversely, self-mortification (*matam*) and crying became even more strongly paradigmatic of Shi'i Islam.¹¹ Shi'ahs in urban areas frequently told me that Sunnis perform drums during Muharram because they inappropriately celebrate the occasion, they are happy, or at least not suitably mournful. In fact, south Asian Sunnis generally do not express happiness that Husain was slaughtered, but they do emphasize the positive aftermath of the battle in which the values of Islam were restored. Processions in Lucknow used to include Shi'ahs, Sunnis and Hindus; as communities and values became polarized, these communities began organizing their own processions. When these antagonistic processions crossed paths, fights broke out. And it was not uncommon for the immediate cause of these fights to be discord, both rhythmic and moral, between Sunni drumming and Shi'i breast beating.

With the division of Shi'ahs and Sunnis, and the gradual polarization of perceived sad-versus-happy observances of Muharram, we find that the public displays among Shi'ahs in cities

¹⁰ I am indebted to Amera Raza for translating Aziz's *fatwas* for me from Urdu to English and discussing with me their implications.

¹¹ For more on the argument that *matam* is a ritual behavior that is distinctively Shi'i, see Pinault (2001); for more on the Shi'ah-Sunni divide and their positions on drumming, see Wolf (2000a).

have become increasingly oriented towards the visible embodiment of mournful sentiments. Some one hundred years ago and more, Muharram's rather splendid affective texture was registered in the public sphere—Abdul Halim Sharar's (1860-1926) accounts in *Lucknow: The last phase of an oriental culture* bear eloquent testimony to the lavish Muharram observances in the time of Wajid Ali Shah, and those of Mrs. Meer Ali Hassan do so for the earlier part of the century (Ali 1832). Now it appears as if this emotional spectrum has narrowed in Shi'i discourse and in public display. Shi'i drumming—taken as a public sign of celebration—has been almost completely obliterated in major Indian cities, and almost all Shi'ahs I spoke with found it impossible to believe that a Shi'ah could ever consider drumming during Muharram. But in small towns and minor principalities in Uttar Pradesh, it is still possible to find continuity in these drumming practices (although Shi'i drummers consider drumming sad in these places). Sunnis, of course, continue to observe their own forms of Muharram, but they too were affected by reforms; some of them intimated that they were instructed by their religious leaders to abandon practices of drumming and making tomb replicas.

Kota practices were also affected by Victorian morality and religious reform, and as among Muslims, the actual changes in practice lagged some fifty to seventy-five years behind the movements themselves. Primarily, critiques in Kota society were leveled at the dry funeral and bore the unmistakable stamp of national social and religious reformist ideologies: 1) the dry funeral was considered wasteful because it required an enormous expenditure of time and money 2) central rituals in this funeral were disgraceful because they required cow and buffalo sacrifices and 3) the behavior characteristic of this ceremony included sexual licentiousness and intoxication, suddenly in the 20th century considered indecorous in light of high caste Hindu and

Christian funerary practices. Although the dry funeral was completely abandoned in only one of the seven Kota villages, general effects of reform permeated the entire population.¹²

Their overall affective impact was a “hardening of the categories.” In times past, rituals and pieces associated with divinity and death, and worshipfulness, joy, sadness, and somber respect, were juxtaposed and interwoven in complex and not always easily explainable ways. The rituals are still complicated, but there has been a clear attempt to rationalize the Kota religion—rationalism being a key reformist concept (See, e.g., Kopf 1979, 42-85). So, for example, in the same village where the dry funeral was abandoned, the practice of dancing around the corpse during the green funeral has also been dropped—too cheerful for a ritual that has crystalized into something more narrowly somber. In another village, on the understanding that there is a clear progression from sadness to happiness, the practice of performing the “gathering at the land of the dead tune” has been discontinued; it is the saddest tune in the Kota repertoire, and by the end of the dry funeral people feel all that sadness is supposed to have been eliminated. There are other changes as well: special repertoires for buffalo sacrifice and other discontinued rituals are gradually being forgotten; one result is the tunes are being recontextualized, serving as reminders—albeit ambivalent ones—of these bygone practices.

Again, this is not a matter of simply mimicking high caste or bourgeois values, nor is it a matter of imbibing directly the ideals of any one major reform movement: funeral music has not been abandoned, only dancing (in one case) and competitive, public animal sacrifice; the reasons behind each individual change in practice are tied to specific cultural and historical issues, but they are also clearly related to subcontinental trends. There are many ways in which one can represent the end results of the changes in Kota funerals and Muharram rituals; I have chosen to

¹² For the soteriological implications of these ritual changes, see Wolf (2000/2001b).

use emotion and affect because it seems to me that the rituals that were stripped away in both cases are those that, in the view of the participants, appear to increasingly critical onlookers as affectively inappropriate to the occasion—too happy, frivolous, sensuous or permissive for an occasion morally “defined” by sadness.

Concluding Reflections

In discussing reformist impacts on musical practice I am afraid I may have painted a grim picture, but I should emphasize that these changes in size of repertoire are most pronounced in urban or urbanizing areas. Remarkably, a great deal of variation continues to be generated as people from cities and villages interact with one another and as peoples of different communities alternately fuse and polarize in response to political and economic exigencies. Although some repertoires are indeed becoming impoverished, others are not. In either case, the epistemological data about the role of music and the place of emotions in mourning rituals remains astoundingly rich and diverse.

Moving beyond the immediate field data presented here, I would suggest that it will be fruitful in further research projects to examine ritual contexts which exhibit rich textures of sentiments. Mourning rituals make good case studies because they involve remarkable concatenations of diverse emotions, such as grief, wistfulness, triumph and tribute, and these emotions are registered in multiple kinds of behavior. I was surprised that in a recent volume on the meanings of death in south Asia (Schömbucher and Zoller 1999), although several authors cited Metcalf and Huntington’s “Celebrations of Death,” none elaborated much on the affective complexity of mortuary rituals, nor its spatiotemporal contingencies.

I have found that peoples’ aesthetic responses to musical mourning repertoires vary widely, and eliciting these responses was a serious methodological problem. Still, a number of

Muslims, Hindus and tribals were able to describe to me the musical features that they felt held the power to move them emotionally. Some felt, for instance, that sadness was communicated by muted timbres, lethargic tempos, and deep pitches—musical features that resonate with doleful attributes in my own culture. But the problem was that in practice so-called sad music did not always exhibit these stylistic features; this may be one of the reasons why music is considered so problematic in Muharram—the overall occasion is supposed to be sad, but in modern times urban Shi‘ahs don’t experience the traditional musics associated with it to be sad enough. And to further complicate things, aesthetic statements applying to one instrument did not necessarily apply to another. In the end, I found that the ways in which people connected musical sound to emotional attributes were extremely idiosyncratic and tied to specific contexts in particular political climates. For these reasons I have focused on general principles of classification in this paper and not on the relationship between emotional attributes and musical styles.

At the risk of overgeneralizing, I think it worthwhile to adopt (tentatively, at least) a subcontinental view of music in mourning, and observe that the more culturally distant are communities from high caste Hindus, the more variegated, marked, and pronounced are their musical repertoires of mourning. Whereas, at one extreme, one may observe that Brahmins (except in rare cases) avoid using instrumental music in their funerals, at the other extreme, there is a concentration of primarily Scheduled castes whose musicians perform, or once performed, distinctly funerary instrumental repertoires, defined largely by rhythm. Moving down the caste scale (not a continuum, necessarily), there are not only funerary repertoires of increasing distinctiveness but also public displays of increasing pomp, occasionally bordering on the comical. In parts of Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh, corpses are at times carried in sitting rather

than prone positions, and decorated with colorful powders and flower garlands, coins and shiny objects, mirrors, and fancy clothes. Drummers in some south Indian funeral processions clown around and dance, playing their instruments artfully or acrobatically, and collect money from appreciative onlookers using their teeth. I would suggest that it is in these displays, and in urban funeral processions which employ Western marching band instruments, that we find the most significant continuities between *dalit* and tribal funerary practices and Muharram as it is practiced in many parts of south Asia. It is useful to think about the recent history of ritual mourning in urban south Asia metaphorically in terms of a narrowed emotional spectrum; but affective diversity and difference has by no means disappeared. What has been particularly interesting to me is how the variety of musics and the variety of emotions characteristic of mourning rituals have been reshaped according to patterns that are both regional-cultural and national, both intricately interwoven with issues of local religion and pan-religious, and both characteristic of south Asia and applicable to the study of music in mourning anywhere in the world.

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